

All About Weaning

The relationship between a baby bird and its food is more intricate than you might think.

By Kashmir Csaky

When you hand-feed chicks, you need to feed them as soon as their crops are empty or just before their crops empty. Once chicks are on only two hand-feedings a day, they begin refusing formula, taking less and less at each feeding. They become increasingly difficult to feed as they refuse food; they would rather run off to play. They sling formula around the room or dribble huge puddles of baby food on their feet. This is when weaning begins. Prepare for it.

Weighing Baby Birds

Weigh young birds every morning when their crops are empty. Record each bird's weight and the amount of food at each feeding. This information makes the weaning process much less stressful for the chick and for you. Reviewing these records will tell you if it is safe to stop hand-feeding a chick and allow the chick to become food-independent. When the chick progresses to only two hand-feedings a day, it will peak in weight and then begin to lose weight. After fledging, the chick will regain some of the lost weight, and then its weight stabilizes.

Healthy young baby birds are round, chubby and cute, with fat toes and wing tips. They must burn off this baby fat in order to spread their wings and lift themselves into the air to fly. Their refusal to eat can be terrifying, especially to the novice hand-feeder, yet I cannot stress how important it is not to force-feed a baby bird. Too many babies have been killed by well-meaning people who tried to force an uncooperative chick to eat.

If you maintain weight records, it will be clear how much weight the chick has lost. Comparing weight records of chicks of the same species helps to determine if a particular chick is underweight for its age.

Weight loss after a baby reaches its peak weight should range from 10 to 25 percent. This varies depending on the species. Large species and large chicks within a species will lose a greater percent of their weight. If a baby loses too much weight, consult an avian veterinarian; an advanced aviculturist's involvement may be necessary.

Terminology

Wean — The process of becoming food-independent; the time that birds start picking up solid food and eating on their own.

Food-independent — When birds can eat enough food on their own to sustain life, promote growth and provide enough nutrition to engage in normal activity.

Forced weaning — Eliminating supplemental feeding when birds are eating enough food to sustain life yet unable to consume enough nutrition on their own to develop strong bodies and engage in normal activity for their age. Offering

Solid Foods

There are as many opinions about when to offer solid foods to chicks as there are people raising birds. I offer solid foods just prior to fledging. Baby birds being raised by their parents would not have the opportunity to eat any solid food until they fledge, so it is the natural time for solid foods to be available.

At fledging, chicks are capable of accelerated learning; to survive in the wild, they must learn very quickly. They will remember items offered as food at this time for a lifetime. Therefore, offer a tremendous variety to fledglings.

When providing small amounts of a variety of foods you easily can tell which foods are eaten and which are not. Continue to offer foods that are ignored, but increase favorite foods so that the chicks begin to learn to eat well on their own.

When my chicks just begin to wean, I offer large pieces of corn on the cob. At first they view the corn as a toy, jumping on it and mouthing it. They quickly discover its sweet-tasting kernels that burst in their mouths. Another wonderful weaning food is peas in a pod. The parrot chicks instinctively tear open the pod and devour the peas. One of my favorite weaning foods is a mixture of mashed sweet potatoes with peanut butter and coconut milk. This soft, mushy combination can be fed warm and is a gradual step from formula.

Difficult Weanings

Some chicks might refuse to become completely food-independent, although very few chicks will not attempt to eat some food on their own. Hand-feeding at this stage is often a psychological dependency. If a healthy chick persists in begging for food, then reduce the amount of formula given, and slowly lower the temperature of the formula to 80 degrees Fahrenheit from the normal temperature of 101 to 110 degrees Fahrenheit.

Some species, such as hyacinth macaws, simply take longer to wean than others, and cockatoos as a whole tend to be difficult. You might have better luck weaning the chicks with their clutch mates, because their natural competitiveness will encourage them to try to get the food – whatever food – is being offered.

Illness or beak deformities can also slow a chick's weaning process, although it will get there eventually. If a parrot past weaning age still shows no signs of becoming food-independent, take the chick to an avian veterinarian with some experience in avian pediatrics. It might have a mild infection.

The Flight Connection

Although nearly-weaned chicks become boisterous and unruly, do not trim its wing feathers at this time. If you do, your young bird won't understand why it cannot fly and might refuse all food in an attempt to lose the weight necessary to fly. Not learning to fly at this critical time can cause other psychological and physical effects, too. These include loss of confidence, underdeveloped muscles and bones, balance problems and a weakened respiratory system.

After babies fledge, their weight continues to drop for a short period of time. Once chicks develop some skill in flying, they will beg for more food because flying requires more energy and better nutrition than walking or perching.

The practice of hand-raising baby birds is both an art and a science. It requires experience and intuition. These skills must be at their perfection during weaning, which is one of the most challenging facets of aviculture.